

“‘What Is It?’ for Dinner”

John 6:25-51

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Sermon

For the last several weeks, we’ve been looking at John 6. Hopefully you remember that John 6 begins with a question. Jesus leads all these people into the countryside (the wilderness) on the other side of the sea and the Jordan, and there He asks His disciples, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?”

It’s a question that is familiar to us:

“How will I satisfy this hunger in my soul?”

“How will I feed my family and friends?”

“How will we nourish a world plagued by famine?”

Every week I ask, “What is it that will feed this congregation?” People leave church and grumble:

I didn’t get fed. Peter, how are you gonna feed me? How are you gonna get me to where I’m going? By the way, where *are* we going? Honestly, it seems like we’re just wandering around out here in the wilderness, occasionally taking communion. But...

How are we gonna get to where we’re going?

What is it that you’re trying to do?

What is it that you’re trying to say?

What is it that you’re trying to feed us?

So I feel the question: “How will we feed all these people?”

-and-

“How do we feed all these different people in different places?”

Take a look at the screen, and pick the adjective that best describes you right now in this moment:

Angry

Anxious

Happy

Sad

Guilty

Forsaken

Broken

Pick one.

How many feel angry? Don’t worry, Jesus got angry. But what is it you need to hear?

How many are anxious or afraid? What is it you need to hear?

How many just want to party? What is it you need to hear?

How many just want to cry?

How many just want to hide?

How many feel that you’ve been forsaken?

How many feel so broken that all you really want is to get a drink, and drink until you’re drunk?

Now, what words could I speak that would nourish people in all those places?

What program?

What policy?
What plan?
What lesson?
What is it?

Well, I've prayed for it. People worldwide long for it. Little kids dream about it. Something like this:

[Video clip #1 – *Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs*]

[Music plays while hamburgers fall from the sky onto happy townspeople]

Flick: [laughs and catches a hamburger]

Girl: *Daddy! Get your camera!*

Patrick: *This just in, our humiliated weather intern is apparently back for more.*

Sam: *Thanks, Patrick. OK, everybody, you are not going to believe this one, but I am standing in the middle of a burger rain. You may have seen a meteor shower, but you've never seen a shower...meatier than this. For a town stuck eating sardines, this is totally manna from heaven.*

That was Sam Sparks, the weather girl in the recent movie *Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs*. Flick, the boy in the lab coat, invented a machine that would make clouds rain food. That's good news in Flick's island village, where hard times have forced everyone to eat nothing but sardines. Sam the weather girl says, "This is totally manna from heaven."

Manna. That's interesting, for it turns out that John 6 is all about manna. In John 6, Jesus feeds the 5,000 in the wilderness with miracle bread. Then He walks on the sea. It's like a new exodus to a new Promised Land. And now Jesus talks about manna.

We first learn about manna in Exodus 16, when the Israelites start to grumble, worried about the future, and longing for the past.

Exodus 16:10-15:

And behold, the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. And the LORD said to Moses, "I have heard the grumbling of the people of Israel. Say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread. Then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.'" In the evening, quail came up and covered the camp, and in the morning dew lay around the camp. And when the dew had gone up, there was on the face of the wilderness a fine, flake-like thing, fine as frost on the ground. When the people of Israel saw it, they said to one another [in Hebrew, man-hu], "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat."

Then Moses explains some rules about manna. He says, "Gather it each one of you, as much as you can eat. But don't store it up or it will stink." You see, manna is *now*. It's like daily bread. Manna is new every morning. It won't keep, except on the Sabbath, the 7th day...like that day is eternally now, and forever new.

Well, manna is everywhere. But the only time that manna can be found is *now*. Perhaps the most amazing thing about manna is its name. I recently heard a sermon on this. Craig Larsen said that the greatest thing about manna is its name. It literally means, “What is it?” So every morning, Hebrew moms would go out and collect a bowl of What is it? They’d bring it back and prepare it as creatively as they could. They’d put it on the table. The kids would look at it and say, “What is it?” “Yes,” their mother would reply.” And you know the Church is a mother. And I think this is still the breakfast we are to serve.

“Peter, I feel like we’re wondering in the desert.”

“What is it you’re trying to say?”

“What is it that you’ll do for me and my family?”

“Well, here...have some of this.”

“What is it?”

“Exactly.”

See? The answer to our question is another question. On the journey, God feeds us with a question. So if you don’t ask, “What is it?” perhaps you’re not eating your dinner. (Your dinner of What is it?)

The Israelites were never told to understand manna. They were told to *eat* manna. If you think about it, that’s the way it is with all food. Food is life. No one can make life, that is, make food. We can only take food, take life, and eat it. No one understands it...not really. You don’t begin to understand the biomechanics of a cheeseburger, and yet you eat it, taste it, chew it, digest it, experience it, trust it. People say, “I can’t trust God. I don’t understand Him!” Well, that’s strange, because you trust cheeseburgers, and you don’t understand them.

Well, God feeds them with What is it?—a question. Perhaps the right question nourishes faith more than a list of answers. God feeds them with What is it? And He seems to take it rather personally. In Numbers 11, when the Israelites complain about manna, God gets furious. He almost fries the entire nation. So it makes you wonder:

What is it about What is it? that God takes so *person-ally*?

In Deuteronomy 8, toward the end of the journey, Moses says to Israel, “The Lord has led you these 40 years in the wilderness that He might humble you.... He humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with What is it?” Remember, Eve tried to feed herself with the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, knowledge rather than trust. Moses said, “He fed you with What is it? which you did not know, nor did your fathers know; that He might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

So manna is like bread, but more than bread, it’s like a word. And the Father wants Israel to trust His Word, and feed on His Word. For man can’t live by bread alone—food from the sky alone.

In *Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs*, Flick discovers that what he’s really hungry for is the love of his father.

[Clip #2 – *Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs*]

[Flick sighs as he watches his father write, "Sardines 100% off" on a store sign.]
Kid in background: *I love spending time with you, Dad.*
Flick: *Hey, Dad, I'm headed back to the lab. If you want to come I could show you how I make the food.*
Dad: *No thanks. That techo-food...it's too complicated for an old fisherman.*
Flick: *Got it.*
Dad: *Could still use your help around here though, you know.*
Flick: *I'm working with the mayor now, Dad. I mean, the town's grand reopening is in, like, a week.*
Dad: *Right. Got it.*
[Flick leaves his father's store]

See, the problem is that his father can't find the right words, and Flick can't seem to trust his father's words. They're all fishing metaphors. Well, food from the sky doesn't work out so well in the movie. But on the journey (that is, the story), Flick learns to trust the true bread...the real manna.

[Clip #3 – *Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs*]

Dad: *Now, uh, you hear me make a fishing metaphor, just know that fishing metaphor means I love my son.*
Flick: *I love you too, Dad.*
[Father and son embrace. The crowd cheers.]

That's the real manna: the word of his father.

Well, it's just a stupid kid's movie! Back to the Bible. Manna—What is it?—remains a mystery for 1,500 years, until John 6. Let's read it.

John 6:25-33:

When they found him [Jesus] on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal."

Then they said to him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe [pistis—trust] in him whom he has sent." So they said to him, "Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna [the What is it?] in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

Did you get that? The answer to the question, which was an answer to another question, is an even better question. “What is it?” is actually “Who is it?” “The Bread of God is He who comes down and gives His life to the world.” He gives His life to the world...He gives...present tense. Like manna is being given *now* to the world. Not just a few people...the whole world! Remember, we’ve already read:

John 1:1-4, 9-10:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men.... The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.

It’s like the manna, the life, the music is *in* the world and all around us, but we don’t see it, hear it, digest it, or trust it...because we don’t know what it is. Or more accurately, we don’t know who He is.

Around 8:00 a.m. on the morning of January 12, 2007, a man in a baseball cap played a violin in a subway station in Washington, D.C. The music filled the station and surrounded everyone there. He played for 45 minutes, and 1,097 people passed by. Only six people stopped, and only for a moment. Lots of children stopped, but every parent forced their child to keep moving. The man collected \$32.17. But no one applauded when he was done. The concert was caught on video tape. Here’s just a portion:

[Video clip – Subway Violin: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnOPu0_YWhw]

That guy’s pretty good, huh? The music was everywhere, and it was absolutely free. Yet he was playing on a \$3.5 million violin. Just two days before, he had sold out an entire theatre in Boston, where the average seat cost \$100.

“What is it?” Even better, “Who is it?” It is Joshua Bell, perhaps the greatest violinist in the world.

Joshua, *Yeshua*. Do you know Him? Would you like to?

Maybe we’re like those people traveling through the subway...surrounded by music, but we can’t hear it or see the Musician. Perhaps we’re thinking about the past (where we’ve been), like the Israelites kept thinking about Egypt. Perhaps we’re desperate to get to where we’re going, like the Israelites longed for the Promised Land.

What if Heaven (our promised land) is a concert? Well, then to truly arrive, we’d need an ear for the music being played.

What if Heaven is a banquet? We’d need an appetite for what is being served.

I wonder if any of those people were on their way to a concert. Are you on your way to a banquet?

Are you sure you have an appetite for what’s being served?

Perhaps we hear the music but don't listen, because it's free...or because we think it will cost us. Perhaps we don't trust the Musician, and we have no appetite for grace.

Well, after John writes John 1:10, "He was in the world, and the world was made through him, but the world knew him not..." he writes, "The Word [the *logos*, the rhythm, the meaning, the life] became flesh and dwelt among us...full of grace." So, in John 6, Jesus says:

John 6:33-35:

"For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." Jesus said to them, I am [ego, eimie] the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever trusts in me shall never thirst."

Do you ever hunger?
Do you ever thirst?
I do.

It means we don't trust Him completely...yet. You know, trust is not the product of the intellect, the result of figuring stuff out by analyzing what it is. I trust my wife more than any person alive. But that sure isn't the result of critical analysis. And I sure as heck haven't figured her out. But I trust her. That trust comes from 27 years of walking together...communion on a shared journey. Communion. So, our destination is our journey, because our destination is a communion of trust, built on our journey.

At the beginning of our journey (in Eden), we didn't trust that our Father was good; we didn't trust that He'd feed us and get us to where we were going—"His image." According to Scripture, every problem in this world is a result of the fact that we do not trust our Father's heart. We say, "What is it? Is it good?"

Now Jesus, "The Word of the Father from the bosom of the Father," continues:

John 6:36-40:

"But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not trust. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him [literally, "into Him, on Him, even by means of Him, through Him"] should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."

That's pretty dang good. "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me [which is all the Father gives me] I will never cast out." How much does the Father give the Son? In John 3:35, Jesus said, "The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand."

"All that the Father gives me [which is all things] will come to me, and I will never cast out." All things. "Behold, I make all things new," says Jesus in John's Revelation. Perhaps you can't figure that out! But can you trust God's Word? Some people don't want to trust.

John 6:41-42:

So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They said, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?"

See, the Jews thought they controlled the manna. For years, they kept some of it in the Ark, in the temple guarded with soldiers and stone. When Jesus was lifted up on His cross, the temple ripped open, and then it was utterly destroyed.

John 6:43:

Jesus answered them, "Do not grumble among yourselves. No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him."

He doesn't blame them for not coming to Him. They can't. They can't have faith until God gives them faith. But check this out: The religious folks were proud of their "faith." Are you proud of your faith? If so, it's not faith. It's flesh. Real faith is a gift of grace. "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." Draws him. The word "draw" is used just a few times in John:

In John 21, it's a fishing metaphor. Like a fisherman draws his net, God draws you.

In John 12, Jesus tells us what the net is (John 12:32): "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw...."

I think a great translation is "romance," for Scripture says, "He draws us with loving kindness." Nothing is more powerful than the romance of God; the loving kindness that is God. Jesus knew that, when they tried to make Him king. Perhaps that's why He ran away. "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, I will (romance) draw all people to myself.' He said this to show by what kind of death He was going to die." To romance a person is to win their trust, so they trust your love and surrender to the music that is you.

John 6:44-51:

"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. It is written in the Prophets, 'And they will all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me—not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes [trusts] has eternal life. [Literally, "the life of the age," God's age. So to believe is the presence of the future, the very presence of your destination.]

I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. [Literally, "into the age"...it's life of another age.] And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

That's manna! – "What is it?"
What is it? This:

[Video clip – *The Passion of the Christ*]

[Jesus serves communion to his disciples.]

Jesus [in Greek]: *Take this and eat. This is my body which is given up for you.*

[New scene: Jesus bloody on a cross that is being raised up and put into the ground. Music plays, and the camera pans to the faces of those watching.]

That's manna.

What is it? The Word of God.

Who is it? It's Jesus.

Where is it? Everywhere.

When is it? Now.

What's He doing? Romancing you.

Exactly how is He doing that? I don't know. Perhaps you should ask Him? After all, it is manna—What is it?

We all ask, "What is it?" because What is it? is everywhere. All creation is the manifestation of God's Word. But that Word became flesh, and His name is Jesus. Not just a formula, a list, a law, a plan...but a living person: Jesus. What is it? is actually Who is it? So, can you trust Him? Look! He's crucified for you. Where is it? Literally everywhere that's anywhere. He is literally the life of the world, given at the cross. "This is the plan for the fullness of time...to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross."

Everywhere God is telling the story of Jesus and His cross.

Paul writes, "Our Fathers ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the same spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ." Remember the miracle rock in the story of the Exodus? It was Christ. See? I don't think that's a metaphor. It's reality. Manna is all around you. Yet you can only eat it *now*. "Now is the day of salvation." "His mercies are new every morning."

I could get really scientific about that: At the speed of light, all is eternally present. Eternity touches time now.

I could get really philosophical about that: We only can know life, know love, know others *now*.

I could get really theological about that: The Kingdom of Heaven is "at hand."

But perhaps the best way to think of it is that God gives us daily manna. I want yearly manna; storehouses of manna; control of manna. But you can't store manna from the past or keep it for

the future. Manna is the Bread of Life *now*. We think, "If only I'd done things differently in the past, then I'd be living now." And we think if only "this or that" would happen in the future, I would live then. But life is *now*. We can only experience life—know life—*now*. Lose the present, and you lose the manna. And the only way to the Promised Land—eternal life—is manna. The only way to "then and there" is "here and now." Manna is the presence of your destination. Manna is life on the journey. Manna is the way.

Jesus is the manna. Do you see? God is constantly setting the stage of your life, and through Jesus, He is constantly romancing you on that stage. Your destination is the kingdom of love, and He's teaching you to trust His Love...everywhere, all the time.

In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the children say to Aslan, "Will you tell us how to get into your country from our world?" And Aslan replies, "I shall be telling you all the time."

The French Mystic Jeanne Guyon wrote:

You must utterly believe that the circumstances of your life, that is, every minute of your life, as well as the whole course of your life—anything, yes, everything that happens—all have come to you by His will and by His permission. You must utterly believe that everything that has happened to you is from God and is exactly what you need....

He's teaching you to trust, and Jesus is trust. He's your manna. He descends into your life, to live His life in you. So, every moment, you must feed on Him.

"What is it? Who is it? When and where is it? How do I eat it? How do I feed on Him?"

I don't know exactly, and maybe that's why it is a question. He wants you, wherever you are and whenever you are, to seek Him...every moment of *your* journey. Each person has to gather manna. Each person has to ask the question. Asking questions builds trust between persons. Jesus the person has joined you on your journey. Or perhaps, you have joined Him on His. So ask Him, "What are you doing *now*, Jesus? What are we doing?"

Feed on Him. As Jesus puts it, "Abide in me." As Paul puts it, "Pray constantly." As Brother Andrew puts it, "Practice the presence of God." Always be aware of Christ's presence in your life.

- If you want to run away, confess yourself to Him.
- If you're grateful, tell Him...praise Him.
- If you're confused, consult with Him...ask Him.

Do all your work for Him and with Him. Experience life with Him. "He comes to you disguised as your life," writes Paul D'Arcy. He is Life. He is the Bread of Life. And so, He took the bread and broke it, saying, "Take and eat [not take and comprehend]; this is my body given for you." And likewise He took the cup, saying "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is shed for you. Drink of it, all of you. Do it in remembrance of me."

Do you understand that this table is about every moment of your life? For this table *is* life. Life is communion with Jesus.

What is it that I can preach to feed this crowd? Jesus.

So...

Are you angry? Be angry with Jesus. He knows how to be angry and clean the foulest temple.
Are you afraid? Feed on Jesus. Look, He conquered death.
Do you want to party? This table is the Great Banquet.
Do you want to cry? Well, this is the place to shed those tears.
Do you want to hide? Hide in Him; let Him cover your shame.
Do you feel forsaken? Feel forsaken with Him. He'll help you pray, "My God, My God...why?"
Do you feel broken and just want to drink until drunk? Well, look at this table.

You see, He is the Father's Word of love, growing in you. He is your life.

One of the many documented miracles that have occurred in Lourdes, France, took place in 1957. A French father took his ten-year-old son, blind from birth, on a pilgrimage from Brittany to Lourdes. At the shrine, the child begged his father to pray for him. His dad prayed aloud, "Lord, give my boy his sight." Instantly, the boy could see. He looked around. He saw flowers, trees, green grass, the open sky. Then he looked into his father's eyes, the eyes that went with the only voice he had known during ten long years of darkness and loneliness.

When he saw his father, this is what he said: "Oh boy. Everybody's here!"

In this dark and lonely world that leaves you so very hungry, feed on manna. And one day, at the end of your journey, you will look into your Father's eyes and say, "It's You! It was *always* You! You are the music, You are my life, and You love me, in every moment and in every way! And I love You."

Actually, you can say that right here, right now. Let's worship.

Communion

Benediction

As you're wondering around in this life on this journey, don't you ever go out at night under the stars, look up into heaven, and say, "What is it? Pastor Father God, what is it you're trying to say? What is everything about? What is it?" Answer: "The entire creation is a stage, my son, to show you my love. I want you to trust."

If you really believed that, you wouldn't worry about anything. Nothing could really get you down. And you'd have incredible courage. This is what God is teaching me: "Son, I love you. Daughter, I love you. And I am preparing you forever to dwell in my love." That's life. In Jesus' name, believe the Gospel. Amen.

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